The Rebirth of Northern France

By MARIE DE PERROT

PEACE has not come to us of France as it is shown in old pictures, a smiling angel with a wreath in her hand. We have suffered too much; we are, as it were, in a lull after the most terrible earthquake the world has ever seen, causing a devastation so thorough and methodical in all its details, that one wonders how it was possible to devise it.

To fathom the heroism France needs for the task of reconstruction, the undoing of the disastrous effects of the war, you must follow me to its northern departments which have been for more than four years the battle field of Europe. In referring to our North, I shall not speak of it as it was in November, 1918, when the enemy was driven out of it, but as it is at the present moment. And should I sometimes in my description touch upon the past, it is because for nations, as for individuals, past and present are intimately connected. Scenes may change, great upheavals root out the visible form of all that once was, but human nature remains as it is, and people can only be understood when you link what has been with what is today.

To show you the picture at present, let me take you to the three great thoroughfares of Northern France which for more than four years have resounded with the footsteps of millions, civilians and soldiers, enemy and Allied troops. These are the Ypres-Bailleul, the Bassée-Lens and the Arras-Douai routes; they are household words in America and England, as well as in France. Looking at the wide northern plain which these roads traverse, it seems as if the enemy had only left yesterday; the surface-litter alone has gone, and the American and English souvenir-hunter would have difficulty in finding any memento, unless he covets one of the sometimes live shells which the agricultural laborer turns up with his plow and throws on the wayside. The fields right and left are a mass of broken ground, as if an Etna or Vesuvius had upturned them. There are still gun-pits, and some retain their camouflage of green which looks odd against the grey sky, winter having thrown its dim light on all that surrounds you. Barbed wire is piled up on the roadside or is trailing on the ground, like gigantic witches' hair left after a midnight revel.

There is one great change, however, which the cessation of strife has brought about: It is the awful, death-like silence which has followed the uproar and turmoil of the battle. It benumbs body and soul. Into this solitude, are gradually creeping back those who once dwelt here, the industrious Flemish race who, on that wide space, cultivated the beetroot to feed the sugar-mills—this industry being the chief resource of our North—as well as the blue-flowered flax which was woven into wondrous fine linen that successfully rivalled with Belfast, and for lack of which the world today has grown poorer. But even now all looks deserted; it is difficult to find any trace of workers on the vast plain. Instead of the valiant Flemish, you meet sometimes turbaned Indians driving wagons, or civilians on motor lorries bringing provisions to the devastated regions from Bethune to Epinal. There are Chinese working parties too, whose thieving proclivities make them a terror to those whom we once called "refugees" but who now have come back to their own.

Doubtless, all around speaks of desolation and death, a land struck for all time with sterility; and we ask if and how a miracle can happen, so that the wilderness may bloom again. We forget that human courage and tenacity have worked wonders from all time; and that the Flemish race is especially blessed in this respect. Their country has been for centuries the battle field of Europe; Goths, Vandals, Prussians, Spaniards, Germans have settled their differences here. But more even than against man, the Flemish have waged war successfully against climate and water, tearing, as it were, the soil from the clutches of the inundations. Remember that their prosperity dates only from the nineteenth century; that they owed it to their successful industries, thus to themselves; and that energy and power of achievement, such as they possess, cannot be lost while a drop of blood remains in the veins of the people; so long as the great sound of the waves which beat against the shores of our North is heard, her children will respond.

Of the two million people who fled at the approach of the enemy in 1914, or were driven out by them in 1918, about one million, men, women and children, have come back. They have occupied once again the houses, gardens, fields and vineyards. As of yore, the long arms of the windmills, without which no Flemish landscape would be perfect, move again. They no longer look like soulless things, but are working in the breezes of Flanders. On the wide fields, where even before the war the small homesteads lay disseminated, sometimes a few miles distant one from another, clearings have been made by people who live in huts on the roadside. There are also villages where sometimes half a street is left. In these, families have resumed their everyday life, and you meet urchins with satchels and slates going to the communal school which may be held in a cellar, for want of a building. Every man, woman and child in France, especially in the North, is bent upon the great task of reconstruction. *Every* man? Well, it is as the great Mogul Emperor Babar says in his Memoirs when speaking of his soldiers: "Every man behaved splendidly, and those who did not are not worth mentioning."

Help Slow in Coming

IN THE meantime the people have lost everything and have to live. Many, tourists and others, led by curiosity, have come to see them, offering sympathy and asking questions. But of this they are tired, and some have written in chalk on their doors that they have no time to talk. For the French Government, the task of help is a vast problem. Succor, to be adequate, must be varied and efficient. Every department, every canton, every commune has its special needs. Help has been very slow in coming, though the conditions under which the sufferers may obtain a percentage on the sum they claim and may ultimately receive, have become less stringent.

Private French help is doing magnificent work in those parts, and is greatly assisting in the work of reconstruction. On the desolate Artois Plain, midway between Arras and Douai, America and Great Britain are splendidly helping the rebirth of Northern France by their charitable organizations. The British committee of the French Red Cross has taken over two large districts comprising some ninety parishes. Like the Americans who have helped us all through, the English are continuing the work begun in 1914. Women workers form the outposts. They share the refugees' desolate life, eat their food, live in wooden huts in which they keep their stores and have their dispensaries. Farther south, ruined buildings act as store-rooms to which converge the goods sent by the American and English committees. Much work is entailed in the distribution of help; every district has first to be visited, inquiries to be made, the diverse needs of those people who have lost everything inquired into. These once ascertained, motor cars driven by women set out. They are piled up with stores of clothing, bedding, furniture, food, cooking utensils, agricultural and garden implements, which are sold to the people at cost price or given away. It is these necessaries of life, accompanied by words of hope and comfort, which have made the names of America and Great Britain more beloved and sacred perhaps than the military help given during the war; for they have brought to this tenacious and industrious race, scattered in the wilderness where once stood their homes, the wherewithal to go on again.

Before the war, life was very easy in our North. Hard-working, bent on success, passionately fond of pleasure and the good things of life, as the Flemish are, there is, however, a strain of stoicism in their character which stands them in good stead today. And much courage is needed, for life is only slowly coming back during these last fifteen months to those departments which for more than a century enjoyed such unprecedented prosperity, before they knew all the horrors of occupation. The once wealthy villages clustering around the big towns are gradually receiving back their own: To Vimy, one hundred and eighty-seven families have returned; Givenchy, of immortal fame, contains two hundred and seven inhabitants and some three or four villages in the vicinity boast that one year after the armistice, they jointly possessed thirty people.

To help in the work of reconstructing the two thousand towns or more which have been so utterly destroyed that no landmark exists, the government has called in American town-planning experts, among whom is Mr. George B. Ford, the chairman of the New York Town-Planning Board. As a rule, the *sinistre* (one who has met with disaster) has to prove his claim, after which the government committee assigns him a site as near as possible to the old one, though sometimes, when the place has been thoroughly wiped out, hygienic reasons make it preferable to transfer it to some other spot, as is happening for Joinville, in the department of the *Haute-Marne*. The claimant, once having fixed upon the place, endeavors to find an architect to give him an estimate for his new abode. This has to be submitted to the town-planning committee, which in turn forwards it for approval to the Central Town-Planning Board in Paris. Then the proprietor looks out for a contractor—which is a much more difficult job.

At the present time, the work is carried out by Frenchmen, but the task is so enormous that workmen of other nations will have to be called in. The price of building materials, which today cost four or five times as much as before the war, increases moreover the difficulty of progress and causes many builders to stand aside, waiting for prices to settle down. One result is that many temporary buildings are erected. They are often very slip-shod and have to last but a time, with the hope of better things to come. Notwithstanding these numerous drawbacks, everything is progressing rapidly, and there is no doubt that in fifty years' time—in some instances much sooner—our North will have risen from the ashes of its past to higher and better things. Already in some of the model villages which are being erected, the sanitary and general conditions are greatly improved from what they were

British troops entering Lille.

Reception by the women of the first French soldier to enter Lille.

Patrol of the North Lancs. marching into Cambrai.